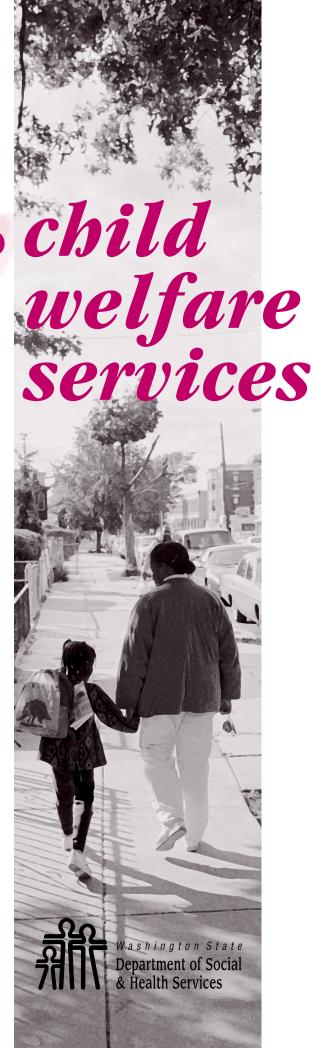
A Relative's Guide to Child





Washington State Department of Social & Health Services

Children's Administration

Division of Program & Policy Development



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# A Relative's Guide to Child Welfare Services

Caring for children is one of the most important jobs of every community. Relatives play an essential role in helping to meet the needs of children who are unable to live with their parents. The connection to family, relatives and community is very important to a growing child because:

- Children can live with people they already know and trust;
- Children can maintain their personal and cultural identity;
- Families learn to rely on their own resources and strengths;
- Relatives participate as responsible and integral members of the child and family's support team.

This booklet will help you to understand the reasons children come into the care of the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the responsibility of the state, the role of the court, the importance of relatives and the options available to relatives.

#### Reasons Children Come into State Care

Children come into the care of DCFS for any of three reasons. These are:

- Allegations of abuse or neglect by the parent;
- No parent is capable of caring for the child;
- Serious family conflict.

The booklet *Child Protective Services (CPS) Guide for Relatives* has more information about how reports of abuse and neglect are received and investigated. This booklet is available from the child's social worker or from the local office of DCFS.

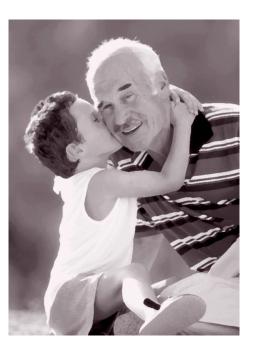
Children can be placed in the care of DCFS by emergency police placement or by a court order or a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA). DCFS then becomes responsible for the safety and well-being of the child. A child may also be placed in the care of a relative by parental permission through a VPA.

In most cases, the DCFS social worker works with the parents to develop a service plan aimed at improving conditions in the family home and allowing the child to return home safely. Until the child can be returned home, the child must live in a safe place. If a suitable relative can be located immediately, that is often the best placement arrangement. Sometimes a child will go into a temporary foster home until a relative can be located and a relative placement approved.

## Preference for Care with Relatives

The law states in RCW 13.34 a preference for placing children with a relative rather than in foster care if certain conditions are met. The legal definition of relatives includes any blood or half blood relative in the extended family and those related by adoption or step relationships. In order for a relative to be a placement resource, the relative must have a relationship with the child and be able to offer a safe, suitable place to live.

The relative must pass a criminal and child protective services background check. Any person age 16 or older living in the household must also pass the background checks. A family member



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with a conviction of a violent crime or crime against children will not be able to have a child placed in the home. Family members with other types of convictions may be able to care for a child. The relative needs to discuss any criminal record with the child's social worker.

The social worker will check the relative's home for health and safety hazards and review the family's living and sleeping arrangements. The relative must also agree to cooperate with the service plan for the family. If everything appears suitable, the child can be placed with the relative while the parent addresses parenting concerns.

# Responsibilities of Relatives

Relatives caring for dependent children are expected to:

- Provide a safe home for the child;
- See that the child is cared for and loved:
- See that school age children attend school;
- Provide supervision for the child;
- Cooperate with the goals of the service plan;
- Cooperate with visitation between child and parent;
- Cooperate with court ordered services;
- Make sure the child keeps all appointments;
- Keep the social worker and court informed of the child's progress;
- Explain to the child in a positive way why the parent is not able to provide care right now.

## Financial Help for Relatives

A relative may be able to receive one of two types of government financial assistance while the child is placed in the home of a relative:

- 1. TANF-Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or
- 2. Foster care payments

The relative may not receive both types of assistance at the same time. (See page 9 for more financial information.)

# Planning for the Child

When the child's health or safety is at risk, a DCFS social worker develops a plan to reduce the risk and improve the skills of the parent. Information from relatives is critical for developing the best plan for the child and family.

# Legal Status of the Child

Whenever a child is found to need state care, a shelter care hearing must be held within 72 hours. If the child cannot return home safely, a dependency petition may be filed.

A dependency action is the legal process for taking children into the temporary custody and care of the state. A DCFS social worker can begin the legal process by filing a dependency petition in juvenile court. A dependency petition may be filed if the child:

- Has been abandoned by the parent; or
- Has been abused or neglected by the parent or other person legally responsible for the child's care; or
- Is in danger of serious emotional or physical harm because the parent is not capable of adequately caring for the child.

The child's parent has the right to have a lawyer at the shelter care hearing and throughout the dependency process. If the parent cannot afford a lawyer, the court will appoint a lawyer to represent the parent at the public's expense.

The court may also decide to appoint a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for the

child. The GAL or CASA is usually a volunteer and does not work for DCFS, the parent, or the state. The GAL's or CASA's role is to independently investigate and report to the court what is in



## Concurrent Planning (Dual Planning)

If the child is not able to return home within 30 days, the DCFS social worker will often develop concurrent or dual plans for the child. This means that a primary and an alternate goal for a permanent home are developed. The main goal is usually for the child to go home to the parents. The alternate goal is a back-up plan in case the parents do not make the changes needed for the child to be returned home safely within a reasonable amount of time. The DCFS social worker will often ask a family member to consider being an alternate permanent resource for a child.



#### Individual Service and Safety Plan

Within two months of the child living away from the parents, the social worker will write a service plan called an Individual Service and Safety Plan (ISSP). Every six months after that, the child's social worker will prepare a written ISSP report to the court regarding the service plan for the child and parents. The social worker usually involves the child's parent and the relative caregiver in gathering information for the service plan and the court report. The original ISSP and the six-month updates tell the judge:

- Information about the child and parents;
- Where the child is currently living;
- Information about the family and any danger to the child if the child is returned home;
- Progress the parent is making towards the goal of child returning home;
- A recommended plan for the next six months and;
- Efforts by the social worker to locate a permanent home for the child.

The relative caregiver receives a copy of the original ISSP and subsequent reports every six months. This report will help the relative understand the issues facing the child's family and let the relative play a part in the plan for the child. This report is confidential and must be kept in a place that will keep the contents private. All reports must be returned to the DCFS social worker when the child leaves the relative's care.

# Reasonable Time Frame for Parents to Make Needed Changes

Recent federal and state laws have established time frames for parents to make the changes needed for the child to return home. If the child has been with a relative or in a foster home for 12 out of the last 15 months, the DCFS social worker must:

- Take steps to terminate the parent's legal rights to the child; OR
- Explain in the ISSP the reasons why termination of parental rights would not be in the best interests of the child.

The social worker must also take action to locate a permanent home for the child.

# Available Help to Make the Best Plan for the Child

#### Child Protection Teams

A social worker, school or a community service provider may call a meeting of a Child Protection Team (CPT) to discuss the child's case plan. A CPT is a group of community professionals who meet on a regular basis to consult and advise DCFS social workers and supervisors regarding abuse, neglect, or other safety issues within a child's own family. A CPT may be consulted in the case of a child being removed from or returned to the home.

## Family Group Conference

In a Family Group Conference, the extended family is asked to come together to develop a plan to care for and protect children in their family. Family members are seen as the experts on the strengths and risk factors of the family. They usually know the safe caretakers within the family and what resources and supports are available for the children.

Cases appropriate for a Family Group Conference include both those with court involvement and those that are not court involved where the parent has voluntarily agreed to placement of the child. In voluntary placements, the meetings can be used as a way to prevent the need for court action. In cases where court involvement has occurred, the model can be used as a method for developing a permanent living plan for the child. If relatives are interested in participating in a Family Group Conference, they should discuss this with the assigned social worker.

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#### Guardians Ad Litem

A Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) is a person appointed by the court to represent the best interests of the child in court proceedings. There are three types of Guardians Ad Litem. They are:

- Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), who is a volunteer;
- A private GAL who is often an attorney paid for by the people involved in a dispute; and
- Family Court Evaluator or GAL appointed and paid for by the court. All types of GALs are authorized to investigate the child and family situation so they can advocate for the child. A few counties also have GALs who are county employees. County GALs may either handle cases themselves or work with volunteer CASAs.

#### **Prognostic Staffings**

Prognostic staffings are meetings in which the relative, the child's parents, GAL, social worker, and others will discuss case information in order to make a decision about what is in the best interest of the child. These meetings occur early in a case when it appears that the child will not be going home right away.

#### Family Reconciliation Services

These services are used for relatives who have adopted the child or who have permanent legal custody. If a child placed in a relative's home is age 12 or older and a conflict arises which cannot be resolved, DCFS can provide the family with Family Reconciliation Services (FRS) to help keep the child in the home. Both the relative and the child must agree to participate in these services aimed at reducing parent-child conflict. If a relative requests FRS, the relative will be assigned a social worker who will assess family conflicts and strengths. Based on this assessment, the social worker will develop a case plan to resolve the conflict. Services continue for no longer than 90 days or until the conflict is resolved, whichever comes first.

# Child in Need of Services and At-Risk-Youth

The Child in Need of Services (CHINS) and the At-Risk-Youth (ARY) petitions are legal options for youth whose parents believe them to be out of the parents' control. These cases can arise when a child will not obey a parents' rules, such as attending school, keeping a curfew, or when a youth wants to live someplace other than the parents' home. Relatives do not have the legal right to initiate either one of these actions unless they are the child's legal custodian or guardian. Relatives may offer input to the court regarding placement options and services for the child involved. Family reconciliation is the goal for both of these legal actions.

# **Court Hearings**

The county Superior Court is involved whenever children are removed from the care of the parents. The role of the court is to ensure the children's health and safety and to ensure that the rights of parents and children are safeguarded.

# Shelter Care Hearings

At the shelter care hearing, the court decides if it is safe for the child to return home or whether the child should be placed out of the home and remain in the custody of the state until a second hearing is held in 30 days. The focus of the shelter care hearing is to protect the child and offer services for the parents. At this time, the court also decides:

- An appropriate visitation schedule for children and parents;
- A service plan for the parents; and
- Whether there is a need for medical, mental health, or substance abuse evaluations for the parents.

## 30 Day Hearing

At the second hearing called the 30 day hearing, the court reviews the status of the child and will either order the child to return home or to remain in placement. The court may also order additional services for the parent and the child. The parties can agree not to have a second hearing and agree to ongoing DSHS involvement. In this case, the court still must approve the agreement in a written order.

#### Fact-Finding Hearing

A fact-finding hearing to determine whether the child should be declared dependent is generally held within

75 days of filing a dependency petition. At this hearing, the parties can give evidence to the court. The parties may choose not to have this hearing and agree to continue with DSHS involvement.

After the fact-finding hearing, the court will issue an order. If the child is found to be dependent, the order will say:

- Whether the child will be returned home, or remain in the custody of the state and be placed in foster care or with a relative;
- What services the parents must complete; and
- What DCFS must do to support parents in completing service requirements.

The goal at this stage is almost always to have the child return home to the parents. This means



that the court is responsible for approving a service plan for the child and family. A proposed service plan is written by the DCFS social worker after talking with concerned adults and with older children. While the child is a dependent of the state, the family, the child, the social worker and the relative must follow the steps contained in the service plan.

#### Review Hearings

Review hearings are held at least every six months. A judge reviews the following issues at the review hearings:

- The child's current placement;
- Parent compliance with the service plan;
- DCFS compliance with the service plan;
- Visitation, if not returned home; and
- Continuation or dismissal of the dependency.

# Permanency Hearing

A permanency planning hearing is held between nine and 12 months after the child is placed in out-of-home placement. The court at that time determines whether to continue or dismiss the dependency. A permanent plan is established for the child. If the child remains in out-of-home placement, permanency planning hearings continue to occur every 12 months thereafter to ensure that the child achieves a permanent home.

#### Relative's Right to be Notified of Review Hearings

Relatives caring for a dependent child have a right to be notified of review hearings regarding the child. They also have an opportunity to be heard at the court hearings. Relatives need to notify DCFS, the parent's attorney, and the child's GAL if they wish to speak in court. Individual courts determine if relatives may speak in court or submit a written report as an alternative to testifying in court.

# **Permanency Options**

If a child is not able to safely return home in a reasonable time, the DCFS social worker must find another permanent living arrangement for the child. As part of the permanent planning process the social worker will meet with relatives to discuss their ability and willingness to care for the child on a long term basis. The social worker will consider the family's stability, health, financial resources and the quality of the caregiver's relationship with the child. If relatives want to keep the child with them permanently, the social worker will meet with them to discuss various permanent plans. Some of those plans include:

- Adoption;
- Permanent Legal Custody (also called Third Party Custody);
- Dependency Guardianship or Other Guardianship; and
- Long Term Relative Placement with Written Agreement.

## Adoption

Adoption is the most permanent plan for a child except for return to the parents. Adoption is an option available only if the parent voluntarily agrees to give up parental rights or the court terminates the parents' rights. No child can be adopted until both parents' parental rights have been terminated. When the parents no longer have legal rights, the child is then legally free to be adopted by another person.

Parents who voluntarily give up parental rights have the option to identify someone they would like to see adopt their child. If the family or individual selected by the parent receives a favorable adoptive home study and the court believes this adoption would be best for the child, this preference must be followed. A parent who voluntarily gives up parental rights may sometimes also have the option of an open adoption agreement. The details of the agreement are worked out between the birth parents, the DCFS social worker, the Guardian Ad Litem for the child, and the adoptive parents.

Parents who voluntarily give up parental rights have the option to identify someone they would like to see adopt their child.

# Permanent Legal Custody (also called Third Party Custody)

Another permanency option for relatives is a permanent or third party custody order. In this situation, the parent's legal rights are not terminated. The child is no longer in the care of the state but is placed permanently into the custody of the relative. A permanent custody order allows the person with custody to act as a parent for the child. Since the order is permanent, there is no further Juvenile Court or DCFS involvement. If the relative was receiving foster care payments, these will end. The child is still eligible to receive child support payments from the parents or TANF support. The child's TANF benefit will not count towards a relative's five-year lifetime TANF benefit.

A permanent custody order may cost some money to obtain, even if everyone agrees this is a good plan, as there may be filing fees and other costs. A permanent custody order is a good option if a relative wants to care for the child without any DCFS involvement and does not wish to see the parents' rights terminated.

# Dependency Guardianship/ Superior Court Guardianship

A guardianship is a legal relationship in which the court appoints someone other than a child's parent to care for the child and manage the child's affairs. Requests for Superior Court guardianship may be sought under RCW 11.88 or in the dependency proceeding in Juvenile Court under RCW 13.34. The guardian is given many of the rights and responsibilities of a parent.

A relative can be made a dependency guardian only if all the following requirements have been met:

- The Juvenile Court has declared the child a dependent;
- The child has been removed from his or her parents' custody for at least 6 months after the child was found to be dependent;
- The parents have been offered or provided reasonable social services to help resolve parenting issues;
- It is not likely that the parenting issues will be corrected so that the child can be returned to parents in the near future; and
- It is in the best interest of the child that there be a guardianship rather than termination
  of parental rights or continued efforts to return the child to his or her parent's custody.

While efforts to reunite the child and parents continue during a relative placement, these efforts stop when a guardian is appointed. However, the dependency order remains in effect. In some counties there is no further court involvement unless someone requests it. In other counties once a year, the court will schedule a hearing to review the status of the case. The relative will be notified of the hearing and should plan to attend. The relative may be asked questions in court about the child's development.

A dependency guardian must be 21 years or older. If a dependency guardian wants to be paid the foster care rate for caregivers, the guardian must meet DSHS requirements and become a licensed foster parent.

A relative wanting to establish a guardianship under RCW 11.88 should contact a private attorney for advice.



# Long Term Relative Placement with Written Agreement

In some cases relatives are willing to make a long term commitment to a child but are not willing to either adopt or accept permanent custody or guardianship of the child. DCFS will sometimes enter into a written agreement which commits both the agency and relatives to permanent placement of the child in the relatives' home. Ideally, the agreement is signed by all of the involved parties, including the child and the birth parents as well as the DCFS social worker and relatives. After signing such an agreement, DCFS continues to be involved and relatives continue to be eligible for either a TANF grant or foster care payments if they are licensed as foster parents.

Relatives need to be willing to support contact between the child and birth parents. Usually, the agreement states how often the child will have contact with the parents.

Below is a table that answers some commonly asked questions for each of the permanency options.

Permanency Options	Adoption	Permanent Legal Custody	Dependency Guardianship	Superior Court Guardianship	Long Term Written Agreement
Child remains a dependent of the state	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES
Relative is eligible for TANF for child*	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Relative is eligible for foster care payments	NO	NO	YES IF LICENSED	NO	YES If Licensed
Child may be eligible for adoption support	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Return home is possible**	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Termination of parental rights	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Relative has legal authority for decisions	YES	YES	FOR MINOR DECISIONS	YES	FOR MINOR DECISIONS

<sup>\*</sup> Child only grant

<sup>\*\*</sup> Return home is based on proof of factors set forth in statute and generally can only occur if ordered by the court, after considering the best interests of the child in individual case by case determinations.

# **Financial Assistance for Relatives**

A relative may be able to receive one of two types of government financial assistance while the child is placed in the home of a relative. The relative may not receive both types of assistance at the same time.

# Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

A relative of specified degree such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, or brothers, including step relationships, may receive the TANF grant for a child in two ways:

#### A. Non-Needy Relative

The household applies for the TANF grant for the child only. The child's income and resources are the only factors considered for determining eligibility. The income and resources of the relative of specified degree are not considered. For this type of household there is no WorkFirst requirement except if the child is 16 years or older. The child's WorkFirst requirement is attending school.

The process for obtaining this grant is the same for any applicant. The relative needs to complete an application on behalf of the child and participate in an interview at the local Community Service Office (CSO). Relatives will need to verify the relationship to the child.

If a relative chooses to apply on behalf of the child for a non-needy relative grant, it will not affect the relative's five-year eligibility period for TANF benefits.

#### B. Needy Relative

This grant is available for a relative of specified degree who wants financial help for the child and thenselves. The relative's income determines eligibility. The relative has to meet the same requirements for eligibility and TANF WorkFirst as any other parent that applies with a child. The application process is the same as listed above with the exception that TANF WorkFirst requirements must be met. If the relative accepts a Needy Relative grant, it does count toward the five-year eligibility period.

Relatives receiving a TANF grant may also receive other services through the Division of Developmental Disabilities or the school system if a child is determined to be in need of additional support.

To receive foster care payments, the relative needs to become a licensed foster home. This means meeting health, safety, space, training, and other licensing requirements.

# Foster Care Payments

To receive foster care payments, the relative needs to become a licensed foster home. This means meeting health, safety, space, training, and other licensing requirements. Once licensed, the relative will receive foster care payments, medical benefits, and other services for the child.

It is important for relatives to consult with the DCFS social worker or consult with legal counsel to discuss whether it is better to receive TANF or Foster Care payments. TANF may be the only option for some relatives if the home does not meet foster care licensing requirements. For more information about the licensing process, please call Families for Kids Recruitment Resources at 1-888-794-1794, or contact the child's social worker.

# Adoption Support

When a dependent, legally free child is adopted by a relative the child may be eligible for continued medical assistance through DCFS and for federal and/or state-funded adoption support payments. These are cash support payments that are available for children with special needs on an ongoing basis after the adoption. This is called a "subsidized adoption." A relative should look into this option before finalizing the adoption because eligibility for the payments must be determined before the adoption occurs. Once the subsidy is approved, adjustments can be made as the child gets older, since the child's needs may change over time. Financial assistance is also available to help with the cost of the adoption. The social worker can provide the name of the adoption support specialist to contact.



# Other Assistance and Support for Relatives

DCFS sometimes pays for other services such as educational supports and training, summer camps and after school activities. The decision to fund and the amount of payment for these ser-

vices will vary according to the needs of the individual child and available resources. The following are other resources that may also be available to relatives.

#### To obtain more

information on available free medical care (Medicaid) through the Foster Care Medicaid Unit, call the toll free number, 1-800-547-3109.

#### Medical Care

Children placed with a relative who is a licensed foster parent will receive a medical ID card automatically in the mail. To obtain more information on available free medical care (Medicaid) through the Foster Care Medicaid Unit, call the toll free number, 1-800-547-3109. Non-licensed relatives should contact the local DSHS Community Service Office (CSO) or the DSHS Medical Eligibility Determination Services office at 1-800-204-2469.

# **Clothing Vouchers**

If the child comes into foster care or a relative placement with little or no clothing, DCFS may purchase limited clothing for the child. A clothing voucher is a one-time payment per child. Additional clothing purchases must be made out of the monthly foster care payment or the child's TANF grant.

# Transportation Costs

DCFS will pay relatives for mileage when they drive the child to activities that are part of the child's service plan. These activities may include trips to the doctor, school, dentist, counselor, the DCFS office, or visits with the parents. Mileage reimbursement may be claimed for trips made only for the benefit of the child. Mileage forms can be obtained from the child's social worker and must be submitted to DCFS for payment on a monthly basis.

# Child Specific Care Plans

Child specific care plans are available only to relatives who are licensed foster parents. Most of the children placed by DCFS have experienced one or more types of abuse or neglect. Abused and neglected children may be angry and rebellious; some do not trust adults and have a hard time developing positive relationships with new caregivers. Some children also have serious medical conditions that require special care.

DCFS sometimes authorizes support and financial assistance for children over and above the basic foster care rate. These payments are made based on the unusual needs of the child and what the caregiver needs to do to take care of the child. The social worker is available to answer questions that relatives may have regarding child specific care plans.

#### Respite Care

In some cases DCFS may agree to allow for the child to stay with another caregiver for a brief period of time, such as a weekend. Respite care is intended to give relatives a break from demanding parenting responsibilities. Respite care is authorized through the child specific care plan in varying amounts depending on the behavioral problems of the children and the needs of relatives.

#### Child Care

Child care services are available to relatives who work. DCFS will work with caregivers to make child care arrangements. DCFS may be able to help caregivers locate a child care center close to the home and will sometimes pay for child care.

DCFS may also pay for child care to reduce the stress of providing daily care for several children or for a child who has severe behavioral or developmental problems. DCFS payments can only be made to licensed child care providers.

#### Personal Care Services

If the child's physical and personal care needs are assessed to be extremely high, DCFS may agree to pay staff to assist caregivers with the physical care of a child. A personal care assessment of the child's physical problems and needs must be completed prior to the approval of personal care services. The child's social worker can assist in this process.

# Counseling

Children with serious emotional problems often receive mental health services from agencies that accept Medicaid. The child's social worker can help a relative locate a local mental health agency that accepts Medicaid. In some cases, DCFS may pay for counseling if the chosen counselor does not accept Medicaid. These decisions are made as part of the child's service plan.

# Interstate Compact for Placement of Children (ICPC)

Relatives with a dependent child who plan to move out of Washington State will need to discuss this with the child's social worker and obtain court approval prior to moving. If relatives have a child placed with them by Washington State and move out of state, the DCFS social worker will be responsible for doing ICPC paperwork so the child's placement will not be interrupted. Most other states will allow relatives to apply for a child only, non-needy relative TANF grant and will issue medical coverage. Relatives will need to re-apply for the TANF grant when moving to another state. The TANF grant varies in each state ranging from about \$100 per month per child to \$500 per month per child. Please contact the social worker for more detailed information if a move out of state is anticipated.

#### Federal Government Assistance

A relative providing more than half of a child's support during the year may be able to take the exemption for dependents on their income taxes for that year. A relative may also be eligible for

the earned income tax credit on their income tax return. More information is available through the Internal Revenue Service.

Under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, a relative may be eligible to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave from employment per year if a child needs special care due to a serious health condition. A relative may also be able to take 12 weeks of leave if caring for a child in the first year of adoption or foster care. This law applies if the employer has at least 50 employees and the relative has been employed there for at least one year.

# **Contacting Your DCFS Social Worker** and Other DCFS Staff

In order to serve the children in care and their families, several people must work together. The child's social worker will play a major role in this effort. As relatives and social workers talk, relatives should feel free to express their feelings, needs and beliefs about what would be best for the child and the family.

Social workers have responsibility for maintaining communication with relatives who have children placed in their homes. If a relative is unable to contact the child's social worker, the relative can call the social worker's supervisor. The local DCFS office has the phone numbers for all DCFS staff. The receptionist can tell you the name of the social worker's supervisor.

## What to Do if There Are Problems?

Relatives who are unhappy with a social worker's actions or decisions should first talk to the social worker. If the relative continues to be unhappy after talking with the social worker, the relative can contact the social worker's supervisor. If a conversation with the supervisor does not help, the relative can contact the Area Administrator.

There is also a formal DCFS complaint process that may be used by relatives. The formal complaint process requires that the relative initiate the complaint with the local unit supervisor before involving the Area Administrator. If contact with the Area Administrator does not resolve the issue, the relative may contact the Regional Administrator.

Relatives who need help to resolve problems and to understand the formal complaint process may call the Children's Administration Office of Constituent Relations in Olympia at 1-800-723-4831.



# Ombudsman Office

The term "ombudsman" refers to a public official who serves as an independent voice for citizens who believe they have been treated unfairly by their government. The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) is an independent agency within the Office of the Governor. OFCO was established to ensure that government agencies respond appropriately both to children in need of state protection due to abuse or neglect, and children and parents involved with the state because of abuse or neglect issues. It is OFCO's mission to protect children and parents from unreasonable agency action or inaction. In addition to contacting the local DCFS office or the Office of Constituent Relations, relatives may contact OFCO with a concern or complaint. There are two ways to contact OFCO. These include:

- 1. Contact the office directly by phoning (206) 439-3870 or toll free at 1-800-571-7321.
- 2. Visit the OFCO Web Site at www.governor.wa.gov/ofco/ofcohome.htm.

#### Conclusion

We hope this information has answered many of the questions relatives may have. If you still have unanswered questions, you can contact a DCFS social worker, supervisor, or Area Administrator by calling the local DCFS office. Relatives should feel free to ask for additional information or clarification. There is a space on the back page of this booklet to write the phone numbers for DCFS staff. Relatives also have the right to seek the advice of an attorney.

Relatives play an essential and important role in helping to meet the needs of children who are unable to live with their parents. Thank you for your willingness to provide care for children in your family. Each of you is very important to the community, DCFS, and most importantly, the child placed in your care.



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